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ABSTRACT

This document, which is designed for curriculum managers at British further education (FE) colleges, presents basic information on the implementation and perceived benefits of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) modular A (Advanced) levels. The information was synthesized from a survey of 12 FE colleges that introduced the modular A levels in 1994-95 and from 37 individual subject returns. Presented first are a brief history of the modular A levels' development and list of key features of School Curriculum and Assessment Authority rules regarding them. Next, the perceived benefits of the new modular A levels for students and FE colleges and their drawbacks are listed. Special attention is paid to the greater flexibility that the modular A levels provide for student and program management and delivery and to the issue of whether the modular A levels are easier or more difficult than the previous A levels. Next, guidelines are presented to help A-level program teams select syllabuses and modules, plan programs, support students, and develop strategies for teaching the new modules. Considerations in developing models of good practice, increasing flexibility for learners, and understanding the objectives of A levels are discussed in a section directed at FE college curriculum managers. (MN)

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ED 392 959

GORDON HOLDING

IMPLEMENTING MODULAR A LEVELS

This bulletin is designed to give information and guidance to colleges on the planning and delivery of modular GCE A levels. It also includes some material on the experiences of colleges which should be of interest to the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) and the Examination Boards.

The present rules for GCE modular Advanced and Advanced Supplementary (AS) subjects were announced in 1993. They were included in the GCE A and AS Code of Practice published in July 1994 by SCAA. These rules have coincided with the introduction of cores for A and AS subjects and the consequent rolling programme of resubmission of syllabuses to SCAA for approval. Examining Boards have taken this opportunity to develop new modular syllabuses.

The first group of subjects approved included English, English Literature, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics. They were first taught from September 1994.

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The new syllabuses follow different rules from the previous experimental schemes. The guidance in this bulletin is based on how colleges were introducing modular A levels in the 1994-5 year. In our investigation 12 colleges completed questionnaires and 37 individual subject returns were received. The findings were subsequently discussed with representatives of other colleges.

This is designed for managers responsible for the overall co-ordination of GCE A and AS programmes and subject specialists, particularly with the introduction of modular syllabuses from September 1996. The experiences of colleges here may also be useful for those colleges considering whether to offer modular syllabuses.

Key features of the SCAA rules governing modular GCE A/AS levels are:

- there must be rules of combination of modules to ensure proper sequencing and coherence
- there must be some form of synoptic assessment to test understanding of the connections between subject elements
- each module must be assessed at full A-level standard
- at least 30% of the total assessment must be through externally assessed terminal examinations. Here 'terminal' means after the final entry date which would be 14 February for summer examinations. Examinations could include written oral or practical work
- each module must be at least 15 % of the total assessment
- coursework is limited to 20%of the total assessment in most subjects
- candidates may re-sit module examinations prior to the final award of the qualification. Each module result may be used for up to four years. The best result may be counted for the award, unless a module is being used to satisfy the terminal examination requirement, where the result must be counted whether or not it is the best one
- once module results have been counted towards an A level, they cannot be used again (except for coursework modules)

The benefits of modular A levels

Why have colleges introduced modular A levels and what do they see as the benefits? The reactions to these questions detailed below were obtained during the first year of the new syllabuses — attitudes may change with greater experience.

Benefits for the student

The conventional A level, since it depends upon sampling from a large syllabus, does not always give each student the opportunity to demonstrate her or his knowledge, skill and understanding fully. Moreover, to some extent the student still relies on the question-spotting skills of the staff. Modular A levels do not remove these problems altogether but they can reduce the degree of uncertainty about what will be required in each examination.

For a young student starting a conventional A-level programme, the two years up to the external examinations seem to stretch far into the future. It is tempting to put off work in the expectation of catching up later but many A-level syllabuses are so full and demanding that the opportunity to catch up never happens. Modular A levels, on the other hand, provide more frequent external assessments with a much shorter timescale. Students realise that they must work hard right from the beginning. Achieving interim success also:

- maintains the motivation of students who might otherwise lose heart and drop out
- encourages students who have to take a break from their studies, perhaps due to personal circumstances, to resume their studies

- might encourage students whose personal circumstances force them to leave a full-time programme after gaining some modules, to continue studying part time

- helps part-time students to move towards the A level a step at a time and at a pace which suits their situation, e.g. the demands of their job or childcare (conventional part-time evening classes often have a high drop-out rate)

- gives real, external, feedback on performance which is early enough to influence the behaviour of students—failure in an early module can be salutary without being disastrous, since the module can be re-sat

- provides shorter term targets which makes it easier for students to plan their study

- makes choices of alternative modules, outside the subject core, more meaningful

Colleges found that students on modular A-level courses were working harder, better motivated and better organised which seemed likely to lead to higher retention and better examination results. An unpublished evaluation of Wessex modular A-level scheme reached similar conclusions, although that scheme operated before the introduction of the present SCAA rules.

The opportunity for staff to brief students for one or two module examinations at a time, rather than for the whole syllabus after five terms work, was also seen as beneficial.

There are specific benefits where several subjects are part of a common modular scheme, for example in the physical sciences. Here a student might start to study three subjects but could cash in modules to gain two subjects or a single subject using some modules from the abandoned subject(s). This can help a student who, for example, has to become a part-timer, to gain some credit for work which would otherwise be lost.

Benefits for the college

Predicted higher retention and achievement both carry financial benefits under FEFC funding methodology and would improve league table performance. Improved examination results and modularised programmes are both attractive to prospective students and would help a college compete for new students.

Adopting modular assessment at A level also makes links with other programmes, such as GNVQs, easier. FEDA research has demonstrated significant overlaps between certain A levels and GNVQs leading to the possibility of economies in planning and delivery.

Some colleges identified modular syllabuses with modular delivery. The modular syllabus provides for modular assessment. It does not in itself dictate the detailed organisation of teaching and learning (nor do conventional syllabuses). Therefore it is possible to teach several modules together in an integrated way. Conversely, with traditional syllabuses the teaching and learning can be, and often is, broken down into modules by the college for delivery even though the assessment is not 'modular'.

The terminology here can be confusing. A simple way of resolving it would be to refer to assessment subdivisions of qualifications as units (as in NVQs and GNVQs). The term module could then be used for a block of teaching and learning. To follow this convention, modular A levels would have to be renamed 'unitised' A levels. The organisation of teaching and learning would remain a matter for the college.

Some of the colleges in the survey listed certain benefits of modular delivery, such as teaching A and AS groups together, which could also be achieved with conventional syllabuses . Years one and two could also be taught together, for at least some modules, where numbers were too small to run separate classes.

Several of the colleges were beginning to unitise their curriculum along the lines of the **Framework for Credit** proposals originally published by FEU and now being taken forward by FEDA. These colleges saw the introduction of the new modular A levels as a valuable part of that process. Two of the surveyed colleges encourage students to take modules of additional subjects as enrichments to broaden their curriculum.

Overall, modular A Levels seem to provide greater flexibility for both the student and programme management and delivery.

The drawbacks to modular A levels

Any college running modular A levels ought also to be aware of the problems that they bring. Our research identified the following.

- all modules are assessed at full A-level standard but it may take some time for students moving up from GCSE to adjust to this higher standard. Students may not be working at the required level until well into the first year or even until the second year. Therefore module examinations should not be introduced too early in the programmes

- students sometimes have to make module examination entries before the results of earlier module examinations are known

- where the college is introducing modular A levels as part of a wider whole-college modularised delivery strategy, tracking students through their various module combinations can be complex

- there is an increase in administration, particularly in meeting Examination Board requirements. More time may needed for staff who are responsible for examination administration

- higher examination fees

- different syllabuses have different numbers of modules and examination periods at different points in the year. Taking some students out of an examination class in one subject to sit module examinations in another subject, can be very disruptive

- the periodic need for examination rooms while classes are continuing in other subjects can cause real accommodation problems. Much time can be lost moving classes from room to room

  Some of the above problems would be easier to manage if there were a standard number of modules for all A-level modular syllabuses.

- Some colleges are delivering the AS syllabus as the first year of a two year modular A-level programme. In the second year it may be possible to go on to choose from alternative modules on the syllabus. At first sight this makes sense since the AS is now largely the subject core of the A level. However, the core can be very intellectually demanding and may be particularly abstract and theoretical. Where this is so it might not be the most appropriate part of the syllabus for first-year students. In some subjects it is a requirement that modules are tackled in a particular sequence but colleges noted that conceptually more difficult modules were sometimes required to be taken first.

There is a case for designing AS examinations to be specifically for first year students. This would enable the AS to be both Part One of an A level and a qualification in its own right. However, it would also cause a number of difficulties. If this new AS were to be made up largely of the subject core, it may be sensible to assess that core at a lower standard than that required in the terminal examinations.

Such a change to AS subjects would also introduce another level in the qualifications structure which would put A levels out of alignment with the NCVQ framework for vocational qualifications. This would make it more difficult to align Advanced GNVQ units and A levels since the former do not have first year units assessed at a lower level. Moreover two AS levels would no longer be equivalent to an A level for progression purposes. A better alternative would be to give proper certification for each module in a standard six module A level. The option would remain of taking examinations for all six modules at the end of two years for those that preferred the traditional approach.

The proportion of available time devoted to assessment is higher and could become excessive although it may also be fairer since students have more opportunity to demonstrate the learning they have gained

Some colleges were concerned that talk of modular A levels being easier might damage their credibility in the eyes of parents, students and higher education. This issue is dealt with in some detail in the next section. It was pointed out that many universities have successfully developed modular degree programmes which include periodic assessment. They should therefore recognise their value

Where colleges described student reactions they were often favourable:

'considerable change of attitude to a difficult subject' (Chemistry)

'100% choice for modular assessment'

'passing one module positively reinforces the will to pass more'

'students working harder at the start'

'improved retention rate' (Mathematics and Biology)

'increased numbers of students taking the subject' (Physics)

'students like work that is packaged in 9 week (approx.) units'

However some reservations were also expressed:

'students are finding the pace difficult' (Psychology)

'late developers less pleased about being pressured early' (Biology)

'many students take some time to adjust to the pressures of assessment'

'students have problems with the pace of the course'

'most students feel that early module examinations are set too soon' (Business Studies)

One college suggested that:

'less mature 16-19 year olds do not like the assessment — they have to work'

Are modular A levels easier?

It is not yet known how the performance of students tackling the new syllabuses will compare with those doing conventional A levels. However concerns have been expressed that they will prove to be easier. This is one of the matters that Sir Ron Dearing is investigating in his qualifications review.

Eight of the 12 colleges surveyed felt that modular A levels were not easier and a further three either had mixed feelings or considered that it was too early to judge. Only one college felt that they were easier, citing the fact that students could retake some modules if they had done badly. It was noted that some modular syllabuses were identical to conventional ones in the same subject. Here the differences lay in the number and timing of examinations and the retake possibilities. Conventional syllabuses can, of course, also be retaken but results from individual papers cannot be carried forward.

Candidates taking the modular route sit more external examinations and are examined on more of the syllabus.

The results should therefore be a more accurate reflection of the candidate's grasp of the subject.The volume of material that must be committed to memory for any one set of module tests taken during the programme, is likely to be less than for the full terminal examinations of a conventional syllabus. However, in total, a student on a modular programme might be assessed on a greater volume of material.

Should success rates turn out to be higher, this does not in itself mean that modular A levels are easier. Generally colleges expected students to do better at modular assessment for the reasons given earlier — harder work, better motivation and improved personal organisation. Students who failed early module examinations and resits, would not be entered for terminal examinations and therefore would not feature in statistics for success based on those examinations. This in itself would drastically reduce overall failure rates. Students not achieving the required standard, would rethink their options and move on to something else. Since students who might fail conventional A Levels would probably never be entered for terminal examinations in a modular scheme, conventional and modular examination statistics may not be comparable and should be treated with caution.

Introducing modular A levels may also lead to improvements in the organisation and quality of teaching, as indicated later in this bulletin.

In some respects modular A levels are harder. Students have to work consistently hard and as explained earlier, they are assessed at the full A level standard regardless of when examinations take place. They therefore have to be brought to the required standard earlier in a programme of modular assessment.

The single set of final examination papers in a conventional A level puts great psychological pressure upon candidates and can disadvantage those who are particularly prone to anxiety or who are ill on the day concerned. With modular A levels this pressure is spread over several assessment points and gives resit possibilities. A hypothesis which we have not tested, would be that modular A levels are easier in the sense that the psychological pressure is less concentrated at the end of the programme and is therefore more manageable for the anxious candidate. On the other hand the pressure is greater in the earlier stages than with conventional syllabuses. Since modular examinations take place several times during the programme, students have more opportunity to improve their examination technique and to learn from mistakes.

if part of the aim of A levels is to test the ability to cope with psychological pressure, perhaps this should be stated in the syllabus assessment aims. The conventional A level imposes very concentrated pressure for a few weeks, with an emphasis on retaining a large amount of material in the memory for a relatively short period. In the modular A level pressure is maintained more consistently throughout the two years and there is a fuller examination of the student's grasp of the subject.

While the demands of syllabus content might be much the same between the two types of syllabus, pass rates and grades in conventional A levels may be as much about the ability of students to cope with a large amount of material at one session, as they are about understanding that material. If this is true, it raises the sensitive question of exactly what abilities underpin standards of examination performance at A level.

Therefore, the issue is not so much 'which approach is easier?' but rather 'what qualities are we seeking to assess?' and 'which approach best examines these?' . On balance the modular approach seems to be the fairest and most effective way of assessing the all the qualities cited in the assessment objectives of the present syllabuses.

It has also been pointed out that to reject modular assessment at A level while making it one of the design principles of NVQs and GNVQs would hinder parity of esteem between these qualifications and would make combining them or moving between them more difficult.

College comments on the above issue included:

'the academic rigour is the same for modular and non modular but the modular assessment system is fairer'

'students taking modular A Levels are more focused upon assessment and work harder to overcome difficulties'

Messages for A-level programme teams

Syllabus and module selection

If it is possible to select syllabuses with the same number of modules and test periods, this could assist the coherent modularisation of delivery across student programmes, and reduce disruption.

Where there are optional modules within a syllabus, they should be selected in consultation with the students to encourage them to develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Modular assessment may not be the only reason for choosing a modular syllabus. For example, one of our respondents welcomed the clarity of the learning-outcomes approach introduced for the first time into a particular modular science scheme. Modular mathematics syllabuses were seen to be more attractive because they included more modern mathematics (such as modelling) and gave more opportunities for meaningful (sic) coursework.

The popularity of AS examinations is likely to increase as students are advised to gain an interim qualification after the first year or where a student decides to leave after one year. In other cases they may be used to accredit achievement in a subject that a student decides to drop after one year, perhaps because he or she has a changed career goal.

Programme planning

Modularisation requires more detailed programme planning, good communications between staff and effective teamwork.

There is little leeway for the late completion of assignments and severe problems can arise if the demands of different subjects conflict. Therefore homework and assignment planning across subjects is essential and schedules should be issued to students, giving them as much notice as possible.

The timing of the first module test requires careful consideration. One college entered all its students early so that they would experience and understand the required standard, but this policy led to a high resit rate. More commonly it was felt to be best left until the second or even, in some subjects, the third term. In the latter case some of the benefits of immediacy in assessment can be lost. Staff teaching other subjects must be kept fully informed about module examinations to enable them to plan their teaching to minimise disruption.

Module resits are disruptive and expensive. Although one college encouraged students to resit if they had not received a grade A, others aimed to keep resits to a minimum. Colleges should consider developing a policy limiting the number of resits that they would support.

Modular A levels open up the possibility of giving students a choice between optional modules within the non-core part of a subject. In most centres it is likely that all the students undertaking a particular subject will tackle the same modules as a group; with, perhaps, some scope for negotiation within the group about module choice. If a centre were to offer module choices to individual students while retaining traditional class teaching, group sizes might be so small that the programme could not be resourced. A large college running parallel groups in popular subjects might be able to widen choice in those subjects without increasing costs but this is likely to be the exception. An alternative might be to offer some alternative modules through supported self study. One college also feared a loss of group identity if a large number of module routes were offered.

The design of part-time day and evening programmes can be rethought. to enable students to learn at their own various rates. Success at individual module examinations will help to maintain their motivation and reduce drop-out. Clearly this variation in pace could produce smaller teaching groups and increase delivery costs. Introducing some flexible learning for at least part of the programme will be worth exploring as colleges gain more experience with the new syllabuses.

Synoptic assessment is an important issue for subject teams. At the moment it is not possible to give general advice on this issue since it is being tackled in different ways between different subjects and Examining Boards. Since it is not required in non-modular syllabuses it is a new demand upon syllabus designers and there is, as yet, little experience of it.

Supporting students

It is important that students are fully aware of what they are taking on before they start their programme. Consequently, detailed pre-course information should be given to prospective students to explain the features of the modular A level being offered. Evidence from colleges suggests that when given the choice most students opt for a modular programme. Therefore pre-course information may also benefit recruitment.

Students will need to develop their examination and study skills at an early stage, including the abilities to plan their learning and manage their time . These skills should be developed from the outset through subject and personal tutorials. One approach is to issue students with a planning folder, with examination dates and assignment requirements set out for them. It would include a private study diary for the student to complete and discuss periodically with a tutor. Such a diary could include a week-by-week countdown to module examination and coursework deadlines enabling the student to recognise the tight timescales at a glance.

Personal tutorials should be concerned with planning and managing student learning. Therefore time will be required for individual and/or small group tutorials. The development of Recording of Achievement procedures will help to develop the student's personal organisation skills.

The teaching time available to prepare students for resits is likely to be small. Colleges could consider developing module revision packages, in a self study format for use in learning centres.

There is a danger that where students are taking conventional A levels alongside modular ones the former will suffer because completing work for modular subjects is seen as the more immediate necessity. On the other hand this mixed arrangement may help some students to reduce the revision requirements for module examinations and reduce the overall pressure upon them when they sit their terminal examinations.

Teaching and learning

The respondents to our survey reported that modularity was leading to better organised and more effective teaching. Some of this could have been achieved by the formal identification of teaching and learning modules within conventionally examined syllabuses but the discipline of module examinations does seem to have provided an important external incentive for staff.

- new and more precise schemes of work are required to ensure that module examination deadlines are met. In the colleges surveyed these schemes are now being used more effectively to plan and guide teaching and learning

- careful planning and teaching which link modules are needed to combat the danger of fragmentation within a subject

- module tests help to standardise the quality of internal assessment across teaching groups

- the transition from GCSE to A-level standards of work must be accelerated. Some colleges have designed their own modules for delivery at the start of the programme to aid this transition

- a faster pace of work is demanded in year one of a two year programme than in a conventional A level

- where there is more than one teaching group in a subject, team teaching and the movement of staff between groups to teach specialist modules, can help to raise standards

- modularity provides an opportunity to improve the management and quality of teaching resources. One approach is for each member of staff to organise and prepare the resources for particular modules which are then shared by the whole team

- practical work, including field work needs very careful planning. Modularisation should help staff to improve the integration of this work into the rest of the programme at appropriate points

Messages for college curriculum managers

No strong college-wide models of good practice have emerged from this research to date but an overall college policy towards modularisation, including a specific strategy for modular A levels, would be a good start. The following need to be considered:

- informing school liaison, admissions and guidance staff about modular developments and ensuring that they communicate with A-level subject leaders

- informing feeder schools, prospective students and their parents

- many staff will be new to the teaching of modular A levels and some subject teams may be considering introducing modular syllabuses in their subjects for the first time. They would benefit from staff development before irrevocable decisions are made about the choice of syllabus and before detailed planning of the delivery begins. This might include briefings from staff who have already implemented them and a visit to another college that had done so

- preparing some written guidance notes for staff including SCAA's rules and a checklist of priorities

- reviewing the adequacy of examination arrangements, including administrative staffing, accommodation and a policy on re-sit fees

- reviewing the teaching time allocated per subject. In some colleges this has been cut in recent years. Some staff feel that they need more time because the assessment demands are reducing teaching time — practical work in particular can be squeezed

- developing supported self- study packages for students preparing to resit modules. Should these be accessed through a central learning support centre?

- whether the choice of syllabus and examination board should be left to the subject teachers or whether restrictions should be imposed to create a common pattern of number of modules and examination periods. Staff should be encouraged to 'shop around' and compare the merits of the different syllabuses on offer. However,final syllabus choice may have to be determined by the compatibility of examination dates with those of the other modular subjects that are being offered. Syllabuses selected may need to meet the needs of both students mature enough to cope with early assessment and those who need more time to adjust

- whether A-level modules should be made available to students as curriculum enhancements to broaden their education

- the scheduling of regular A Level staff meetings to consider matters such as those raised in the 'Messages for the A-level Programme Team' section of this bulletin

- working to exploiting the overlaps, complementarity and contrasts between A levels and other unitised qualifications notably GNVQs and OCN units. This may require a common timetable

Six of our survey respondents had some experience in gaining OCN accreditation for units that they designed to have similar content to a conventional A level. This is particularly useful for part-time students, as it gives accreditation for learning even where the student is unable to complete the A level. Here the same modules of teaching prepare students for both OCN and A-level assessments.

Some colleges may be actively unitising all assessment and/or modularising all teaching and learning. Others may be thinking of doing so. Issues of units and modules are explored in the suite of FEU/ FEDA publications entitled *A Framework for Credit* and modularisation is the subject of current FEDA research.

Increasing flexibility for learners

The modular approach could be developed to create a more flexible qualification that would better meet the needs of individual learners. The existing rules do allow for a range of approaches but some changes to the rules could bring additional benefits.

At present modules can be held for up to four years. If the rules were changed to allow the accreditation of individual modules some of them could be used to improve the quality of a range of programmes. Contrasting units could give breadth, complementary units could be used to extend the application of theory, give greater theoretical content to a vocational area and to add new skills. Moreover students who have had to leave college prematurely could gain credit for their learning.

Standardising the number of modules at six would make it easier to combine A-level modules with GNVQ units into balanced programmes.

What are A levels for?

It would be helpful if the purposes of the GCE A-level qualification could be agreed and clearly set out. These could then form the basis of a proper design specification that examining bodies could use to create qualifications and assessment regimes that were fit for purpose.

Among these purposes should be those of preparing students for adult life, citizenship, higher education, employment, and lifelong learning. Many of the most important qualities and skills required for such progression are not overtly stated aims of A-level syllabuses. Moreover some of the qualities that they actually test, notably the ability to hold large amounts of knowledge in the memory for a relatively short period of time, may now be among the less important ones for adult and working life.

Students are more likely to work hard to develop the identified qualities if these are assessed. While a range of assessment techniques are already in use at A level, these could be extended further if the present restrictions on coursework were eased. Skills such as project planning, technical report writing, leadership and teamwork are important to develop but are difficult to assess properly in formal written examinations.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Modular A levels, with sufficient scope for coursework to enable the full range of student skills to be assessed, could play a central role in a national qualifications framework. Such a framework combining general with vocational qualifications could be flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students and to develop the understanding, knowledge and skills required for our national economic development.

Conclusion

Modular A levels are popular with both students and colleges. There is optimism that they will help to reduce drop out and lead to more students achieving good A-level passes. But introducing them is not without its problems. Careful planning and co-ordination are required. When introduced properly they should help to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They have the potential to contribute to a more flexible curriculum in which it becomes easier to combine them with vocational qualifications.

Should pass rates improve, there may be a tendency to assume that modular A levels are an easy option. This is not the experience of colleges and their students so far. If we were aiming to use A levels to select a small elite, increased pass rates would not be welcome. If, however, we recognise that Britain needs to improve educational performance, both for the benefit of the economy and the individual learner, modular assessment could make an important contribution.

Modular A levels hold out the possibility of higher success rates without compromising the level of knowledge, understanding and skill required.

FEDA would welcome feedback from readers of this bulletin to inform its future work. Please send any comments to:

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Further information

The The FEU/FEDA *Framework for Credit* publications are as follows:

A Framework for Credit: A common framework for post-14 education and training for the twenty-first century (FEU 1995)

Framework Guidelines 1: Levels, credit value and the award of credits (FEU 1995)

Framework Guidelines 2: Learning outcomes, units and modules (FEU/FEDA 1995)

Framework Paper 1: Modularisation, unitisation and flexibility: a credit-based approach (FEDA 1995)